

## Of Tattoos and Constitutions: Redlegs' Heritage and History

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Each year since 1984, the U.S. Field Artillery Association (USFAA), in conjunction with its general membership meeting and often with the Fires Symposium held at Ft. Sill, has conducted a tattoo, or a musical tribute to honor a remarkable Redleg.<sup>1</sup> Today's Soldiers may be slightly confused about musical tattoos because "tattoo," as both a verb and a noun, means something very different than a musical presentation to acknowledge an individual's outstanding contributions to the Field Artillery. The musical tattoo nonetheless touches on our understanding of what it means to be an American and a Soldier, in profound ways. The Army and our ranch are deeply interested in our heritage (traditions, customs and habits) and our history (an analysis of past events to explain why things happened) to help us define who we are as service members and Redlegs. Musical tattoos and, frankly, skin tattoos, are part of our both heritage and history, and they can help bind us together as a professional community.

A tattoo was originally a musical command (usually played by drummers) to tell Soldiers to return to their quarters. The practice started in the 1600s, when most Soldiers lodged in private homes in the towns that they garrisoned. Generally, armies did not build barracks to house soldiers, but instead placed them in civilians' houses or places of business. The king required homeowners or shopkeepers to provide Soldiers with shelter and bedding (it could be as simple as a pile of straw in a covered pigsty or a loafing shed, for example), candles for light, and firewood for heat. The army sometimes reimbursed the landlord for expenses; sometimes it did not. The Founders (we used to call them the Founding Fathers) included the Third Amendment in the U.S. Constitution, not because of a reaction to the costs involved in feeding and housing soldiers, but rather the principle that armed agents of the state must be kept away from civilians to preserve the integrity of the Republic: "No Soldier shall, in time of peace be quartered in any house, without the consent of the owner, nor in time of war, but in a manner to be prescribed by law." It is not coincidence that the prohibition on lodging Soldiers in private dwellings sits between the Second Amendment, which grants citizens formed in a militia the right to bear arms, and the Fourth Amendment, which says that if the government wants to search a person or his (eighteenth-century law generally forbade women from owning property) premises, the state requires either a search warrant or probable cause that the individual has committed (not will or might commit) a crime. Colonial-era Americans were profoundly fearful of the military—the "standing army"—that English kings used to "tyrannize" their subjects. Without a well-developed civilian police force, British Redcoats—again, many of whom lodged in civilians' homes and places of business—enforced the law as much



Two representative tattoos that every Redleg will recognize: Saint Barbara, the Patron Saint of the Field Artillery and the "Crossed Cannons," the Branch's insignia. (Images are from public domain.)

<sup>1</sup> USAFAA is the US Army's only professional association that still executes musical tattoos. <https://www.fieldartillery.org/tattoo-page>.



as they defended the British Isles. After American colonists started peacefully protesting (through “radical” acts such as writing editorials and marching together in the streets, for example) Parliament’s demands that Americans pay taxes on luxury items and business transactions to pay the costs of the British Army winning the Seven Years’ War, the king sent two regiments, or about 4,000 Soldiers in total, in 1768 to garrison Boston. It was very much a gesture designed to intimidate the local populace into submission. It did not, and hopefully you now recognize the events of the autumn of 1768 as the proximate cause of the First Amendment, which protects freedom of speech, the press, assembly, and the right to petition the government for a redress of grievances. In the late 1760s and early 1770s, howls of protest about Soldiers being placed in “honest Americans” homes joined popular ditties and sermons about “No Taxation without Representation” and the “corruption” of the judiciary. British and American Whigs, as liberals were then called, argued that wealthy elites essentially bought and sold judges just as they bought and sold human property, and they intended to turn everyone in America into a slave. In short order—over the course of about five years—protest became rebellion, and rebellion became revolution. All this combined into the Founders’ defining act of genius: they determined that their army would be different than anything the world had seen since the Roman Republic (see below). Most of the Founders possessed no military experience—they were mostly lawyers, physicians, businessmen, and preachers—but they shared a common vision: their Republic’s army would defend a set of ideas—elucidated in the Constitution—vice a king or a pack of demagogues. You no doubt recall swearing (or affirming) an oath to “support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies foreign and domestic...”

Back to the origins of the musical tattoo. The English word tattoo evolved from “tap toe,”

which meant “turn off the tap,” the signal to tavern keepers to stop pouring beer and serving food. Because Soldiers did not have access to dining facilities and were expected to feed themselves when in garrison, they congregated at taverns and inns to take their meals, and to spend their off-duty hours. Each evening at a specified time, therefore, company adjutants directed drummers to “beat” tap toe, which was shortened to tattoo when it was said in the rural accent of eighteenth-century Britons. Tap toe evolved into the country word tattoo because the Army garrisoned most its troops in Great Britain’s remote locales, not large urban areas where it was more expensive to lodge and feed them.

We use the word tattooing, aka putting indelible ink on one’s skin, because it sounds like a drumbeat as the needle applies the pigment to the epidermis. The video at [https://youtu.be/yaTn6nE\\_a1U](https://youtu.be/yaTn6nE_a1U) shows traditional Pacific Islander tattooing: the application of the ink clearly looks like drumming, and it produces a distinctive rhythm and beat.<sup>2</sup> Of course, Polynesians were not the first people to tattoo their bodies. It is a practice that almost all cultures share. Humans have been tattooing themselves and each other since before we began using fire or alphabets. Individuals of all classes and social strata, but especially Soldiers—Roman Legionnaires, for example, tattooed SPQR (an abbreviation for *Senatus Populusque Romanus*, the Senate and People of Rome) on their arms as the “Mark of The Legion”—have adorned their bodies with ink.<sup>3</sup> But after CPT James Cook sailed to the South Pacific Ocean in 1768—coincidentally the same year the British Army sent troops to garrison Boston—and his crew saw Tahitians’ process for “inking” their bodied, they started using the word tattooing to describe something many of them did to each other and had done to them, both in England and in the South Pacific. The word quickly spread through first the Royal Navy’s, and then the British Army’s, distinctive language communities. Within two generations

<sup>2</sup> Coincidentally, the most recent USFAA musical tattoos have occurred in March, during Asian American and Pacific Islander (AAPI) Heritage Month. In 1992, President George H.W. Bush designated May as AAPI Heritage Month. Fans of WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment) will note that the Roman Reigns character (né Leati Joseph “Joe” Anoa’i), the “Tribal Chief,” and his followers in “The Bloodline” (Joshua Samuel Fatu, Jonathan Solofa Fatu, and Joseph Yokozuna Fatu who perform under the *noms de guerre* Jey Uso, Jimmy Uso, and Solo Sikoa, respectively, each a member of the Anoa’i family) sport extensive Pacific Islander tattoos in homage to their AAPI (Samoan) ethnic and cultural identities.

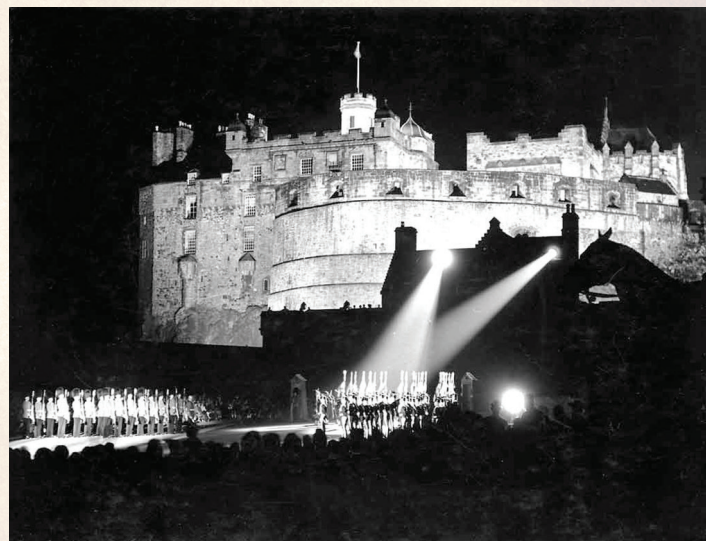
<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, SPQR has become “a favorite abbreviation as white nationalist.” <https://pharos.vassarspaces.net/2018/06/15/spqr-and-white-nationalism/>.



of cook's voyages, applying permanent ink to the skin became universally known across the English-speaking world as tattooing.

Meanwhile, the musical tattoo became more than issuing orders in the evening. Rather than a simple notification to tavern keepers to send Soldiers to their quarters, a tattoo evolved into a complex musical performance used for celebrations and special occasions. The British were especially keen (some still are: see King Charles III's recent coronation<sup>4</sup>) on pomp and ceremony. The musical tattoo—it takes musical performance and marching to a level higher than a simple parade—became a common although not daily, or even monthly, occurrence in the British Army's garrisons throughout the Asian and African empires. This occurred near the same time the British stopped lodging Soldiers in civilians' home, and it instead built barracks and "mess halls" for them across the Empire. While the Army had been comfortable putting Soldiers in the homes and businesses of Englishmen and Scotsmen in the British Isles, or Anglo-American colonists in Boston and New York, it recoiled at the notion of making its Soldiers live, eat, and work with "Natives" who were "foreigners," what anthropologists now call "cultural others." The British "segregated" their Army from local populations, whether in Singapore, or Calcutta and even Canada, and they turned to musical tattoos to give the troops on the farthest reaches of the Empire a reminder of "home." Today, the Royal Edinburg (Scotland) Military Tattoo (<https://youtu.be/oBYVmnMFMtA>) and the Royal Nova Scotia International Tattoo (<https://nstatattoo.ca/>) harken to the past, when the "the sun never sat on the British Empire."<sup>5</sup> India's Navy, our United States Indo-Pacific Command or INDOPACOM ally who is immensely proud of its independence from the United Kingdom and now is part of "The Quad"

(officially the Quadrilateral Security Dialog of the U.S., Australia, Japan, and India) regularly uses a "tattoo ceremony" in a symbolic beating of drums with billeting orders for sailors and marines to proceed to their quarters.<sup>6</sup>



In 1949, the first modern Edinburg Tattoo (now the Royal Edinburg Military Tattoo) attracted an audience of over 100,000 viewers over 20 performances. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth attended the final night of the production, a high honor for the British regiment that marched in the performance. (Image can be found at the Royal Edinburg Military Tattoo website at <https://www.edintattoo.co.uk/history#decade-1940s>.)

Traditions are inescapable parts of Army life. Our Army and branch heritage stretches much further beyond even the creation of the Continental Artillery in the War for Independence.<sup>7</sup> Tattoos—both the musical kind and the innumerable examples that Soldiers place on their skin—are central markers to how our identity as U.S. servicemen and women has evolved.<sup>8</sup> If we listen and look closely, we will see that the past, and our heritage, remains with us to this day.

4 For this highlights of Charles III's coronation, see <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/world/king-charles-iii-crowned-in-coronation-ceremony>.

5 One of the pages that cycles through the Nova Scotia International Tattoo showed that the US Air Force Drill Team intended to perform at the 2023 event. The Drill team preserves "Air Force *heritage* [emphasis mine] as the face of the Air Force." <https://www.honorguard.af.mil/About-Us/Drill-Team/>.

6 <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/beating-retreat-and-tattoo-ceremony-gateway-india#:~:text=Since%20then%2C%20the%20ceremony%20of,to%20proceed%20to%20their%20quarters>.

7 John Grenier, "Field Artillery: Shield of the Continental Army," *Field Artillery Professional Bulletin* 2022 (3): 6-10, at <https://www.dvidshub.net/publication/issues/65106>.

8 In June 2022, the Army updated its regulations for skin tattoos, after an initial change to policy in 2015. [https://www.army.mil/article/257828/army\\_eases\\_tattoo\\_restrictions\\_with\\_new\\_policy](https://www.army.mil/article/257828/army_eases_tattoo_restrictions_with_new_policy). The Army's view on tattoos, like many tattoos themselves, is clearly a work-in-progress.